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Portage River CCC Camp

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Portage River CCC Camp

Superior National Forest

The enrollees at Portage River Camp, 711, in 1933 were a rag-tag assemblage of young men from depressed sections of mid-west cities. Most were without skills of any kind and few had completed their schooling. To their credit, they pitched in and worked at their assigned projects with enthusiasm that made up for their lack of knowledge.

The U.S. Army was responsible for the housing and feeding of all personnel — a duty they carried out in true military fashion under the leadership of the camp commander. The technical staff (foresters and engineers) were supervised by the camp superintendent. Our quarters consisted of a crude log-slab cabin which we constructed on our own time. The army personnel had plush quarters where enrollees were assigned household duties. My intimate associate and fellow forester, Andy Anderson, after a brief visit to the army quarters returned to our cabin with the comment, "My God, they actually have inside toilets over there!"

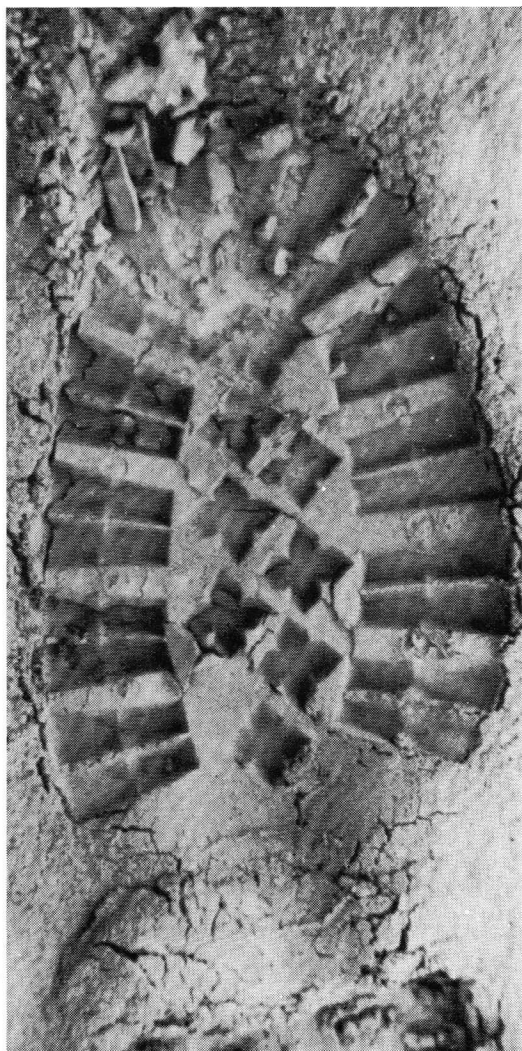
The army had its problems. Many of the enrollees grumbled about the poor food, and some of them walked out of camp. But there were many favorable aspects of life in a CCC camp. The outdoor work in the forest was invigorating, the fishing in the nearby lakes was excellent, and the camp recreation program was enjoyable. The most gratifying aspect of the CCC, however, was the feeling these young men had toward their work; they felt they were doing something that was worthwhile. They planted trees, built roads and fought forest fires with pride in their work. They felt they were making a contribution to the conservation of a great natural resource.

My crew was assigned work in a dense stand of jack pine — trees that had seeded into the area after a fire. The CCC boys thinned the over-dense stands by cutting the diseased, defective and suppressed trees, leaving only the most

vigorous trees properly spaced for maximum growth.

In the Spring, this work in the jack pine was discontinued and the crew was assigned to reforestation of denuded areas, planting thousands of acres of young tree seedlings — red and white pine on the highlands and spruce in the low areas.

When summer arrived, good fortune came to us in the form of a new assignment for my crew. It meant we would spend the entire summer and fall in the back country of the famous Boundary



Waters Canoe Area — a land of thousands of lakes and a vast roadless wilderness. We were to travel by canoes over river routes to our first side camp on Stuart Lake, where we would carry out a survey and mapping program. Our supplies were to be brought in by canoe teams of packers.

It was an exciting prospect, but it had one significant requirement for the CCC crew members. Each would have to undergo a two-week period of intensive training in the techniques of surveying and mapping.

There was considerable doubt in my mind as to the success of the expedition when we loaded our canoes at the Stuart River landing early in the month of June. There were five canoes, two paddlers to each canoe; the tents, food, stove, and other supplies were distributed to each canoe. In addition to our eight-man crew, we acquired a side camp cook who looked less like a cook than anything you can imagine. Ben was a tall, raw-boned, gangly youth from a Nebraska farm. He certainly did not impress the other members of the crew, who were less than happy at the prospect of eating meals prepared by this lanky farm boy. Time would prove that we were greatly underestimating the culinary skills of our newly-acquired cook.

Most of the crew had never paddled a canoe and, as a consequence, we spent the better part of the first hour pulling canoes off sunken logs and rocks, not to mention having to drag two of our crew out of the river. Then the Minnesota mosquitos descended upon us. They were ferocious. Before we reached the first portage, we were ready to give up and return to the main camp. We continued on, however, and by late afternoon we had our first glimpse of beautiful Stuart Lake. We paddled across the glistening lake to the East shore to pick out our camp site, selecting a high hill where the breeze off the lake would

keep the mosquitos and black flies to a minimum.

We had stumbled on a delightful campsite, well-drained and breezy. By sundown our camp was ship-shape and the cook was already rattling pans of food on the stove. Three of the boys completed a small dock at the lakeshore to facilitate canoe loading while the others built a mess table in the cook tent, which served as a mess tent for the entire crew as well as sleeping quarters for the cook and me.

When the crew sat down for supper — to a man they looked dubious. As they started picking at the food, I kept my eye on Casey; he would be the first to complain. There was only the sound of the clatter of knives and forks on plates. Abruptly, Casey stopped eating, turned deliberately and stared at Ben who was busy working over the stove. "Ben, you rascal, you can *really* cook. This tastes great!" Then turning to me, Casey asked, "How did we get so lucky Zim?"

"Don't know Casey — but I sure agree with you — we have got ourselves one hellofacook!"

Each member of the crew complimented Ben who simply ignored everyone as he kept busy at the stove. From that day on, we enjoyed the meals prepared by Ben — which contributed in no small way to the high morale in our side camp.

The first night we settled down on our beds of balsam boughs as the wind whistled through the pine trees, experiencing the unforgettable pungency of spruce-pine forests. After a long day of portaging, paddling and setting up camp, we slept soundly. During the night, I was dimly aware of strange noises and of Ben moving about the tent with a flashlight, but I was too exhausted to pay much attention and promptly fell back into a deep sleep.

At daybreak, we were awakened by Ben clanging on his biggest frying pan as he called out, "Daylight in the swamp. Come an' get it"; a ritual he was to carry out every morning of the survey.

There was excitement in camp. Jack, a big square-jawed Scandinavian came up to me with a double-bitted axe. Half the wooden handle had been eaten away. "Hey Zim, what kinda animal did this?"

"Porcupine. They love the taste of salt and will chew wood handles that have a salty taste from the sweat of our hands. Better check the other tools — we may have some other handles to replace," I said.

"That must be what I heard last night," said Ben. "There was noise back of the tent — but I never found the cause."

"We better get the Colt pistol and kill those porkys before they chew up the whole damn camp," suggested Tony.

"Can't do that. There's a state law protecting porcupines," I said. "You see the porky is easily killed with a club if you whack him between the eyes where he has no quills. This is the reason he's protected. If a canoeist gets lost in this wilderness without a gun, he can kill and eat a porcupine to stay alive."

"What about those quills? Couldn't the porky throw them into you if you tried to kill him with a club?"

"They can't really throw their quills — but if you get too close, they can flip that tail so fast you will think they actually do. If you ever get an arm or leg full of quills — you've got trouble. Each quill has a barbed tip that tears out flesh when you extract it."

Tony looked dubious. "You say you can eat porcupine — did you ever try it?"

The entire crew was gathered around and awaited my answer with interest.

"Only once."

"What do they taste like?"

"I sure don't recommend it as a steady diet. The meat has a strong taste and is

very fat. Some Indians seem to like it though."

We decided to keep the tools secure in the tool box overnight. Through the summer, however, someone would occasionally leave a tool out and it would usually have a chewed handle the next morning.

The boys were very interested in this strange animal and I told them the tale an old lumberjack once told me of an easy way to catch a porcupine. "All you have to do is to locate a porky up a tree; then look around until you find his den tree. Station yourself between the den tree and the porky. Take a wash tub and flop it over mister porky when he comes down the tree on the way to his den — and you've caught yourself a porcupine. Now you can sit down on top of the tub and figure out what you're going to do next."

We started our survey by running a control line from established section corners, which provided a base to work from. After a full day in the brush, we enjoyed Ben's fine supper, then sat around the campfire smoking cigarettes and swapping lies. Unexpectedly, we heard a mournful sound from across the lake. There is no sound that has the plaintive tone of a wolf call. We walked to the lake shore where we could see the wolves across the lake sitting in a circle howling at the moon with their chins tilted to the sky.

Most of the crew spent a major part of their evenings and weekends fishing for walleyes and northern pike. George was far and away the best fisherman in camp and kept us supplied with all of the fresh fish we cared to eat. Walleye is one of the tastiest of fish, and Ben had a knack of bringing out the best of their flavor.

The boys soon began to enjoy this way of life. Each night we gathered around the campfire and watched the flames stabbin into the darkness as we

enjoyed idle talk and the usual horseplay. Each team would relate their experiences while making their survey that day — the deer, partridge drumming, bear cubs. One day Burr and Casey caught a glimpse of a moose, which, of course, topped all the other experiences.

Following this we got down to some serious singing. Tony took the lead and his fine tenor voice inspired all of the boys to join in. On the nights the packers were in camp, they too joined in the singing. My guitar playing was limited to a few simple chords, but it served as a background for the singing and boosted my stock with the boys.

In mid-August we completed the survey work in the Stuart Lake block and made plans to move to a new base. Jack and I left at daybreak to search out a new camp site. We paddled East up the river to Sterling Lake but found the shore was too swampy for a good camp site. Then we followed the portage route to Bear Trap Lake and Sunday Lake but found neither offered a suitable campsite nor good access to the area we wished to survey. We then retraced our route to Stuart River and headed South, taking a sidestream East. Suddenly we made a sharp bend and came upon one of the most unusual little lakes I had ever seen. The East shore of the lake was sheer rock over 100 feet high; rock of many hues — browns, reds, blues and gray. The mirror-like surface of the lake reflected all of these colors plus the pale blue reflection of the sky. Resting silently on our paddles, we studied this jewel that God had placed in this northern wilderness.

Without turning, Jake spoke from his position in the bow of the canoe. "Zim, this has to be one of the most scenic little lakes in the world. And — if I'm not mistaken — there's a perfect campsite on that north shore."

The north edge of the lake did indeed have a sandy shore that sloped upward

to high ground with good cover. We were delighted with our find.

At daybreak the following morning we dismantled camp, loaded the canoes and bid farewell to Stuart Lake with some regrets.

White Feather Lake was to be the scene of near-tragedy. We had scarcely completed setting up our new camp when the wind came up followed by a severe thunderstorm. After ditching around each tent and turning the canoes bottom-side up we crawled into our sleeping bags.

In the morning, we awoke to an ugly, gray day with low, fast-moving clouds overhead. Since the rain had stopped, we began our survey work. One crew established the control line and the others worked north and south from this line. Working conditions were miserable. When it was necessary to run our survey line through heavy understory we were drenched by the water-laden branches and chilled by a cold north wind.

At the close of the day we approached camp and picked up the aroma of Ben's Mulligan stew bubbling on the range. By dusk, all of the crew members were in camp except Casey and Sully; expecting them any moment, we sat down to supper. The storm broke again with high winds, thunder, lightning and pouring rain. As we dropped the tent flaps and lit the Coleman lanterns, the wind howled around the tents and the sky grew much darker.

The boys lit up their cigarettes and drifted out of the cook tent into their sleeping tent. The rain continued falling in torrents and the wind howled through the trees over the tents. I put on my rain gear, dug into my pack sack for the heavy-duty flashlight and stepped out of the tent only to find Ben directly behind me. "I'm going along," he stated.

We sloshed through the mud to the adjacent tent and pulled back the flaps.

The crew was seated in a circle, looking glum.

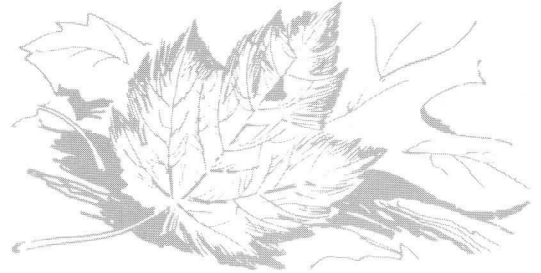
"We're going out to the control line to see if we can find them." I said. "We could use some help, in case we have to spread out for a search."

Silence.

Slowly each young man looked to Burr. A half-breed Cherokee with a swarthy skin, fine features and a splendid physique, Burr talked very little — but when he spoke, the boys listened. I watched Burr, but seeing no change in his expression, I hurriedly left the tent.

"Wait!" It was Burr sticking his head out of the tent. "We'll all go — soon's we get our gear on."

Once we arrived at the control line it



was a simple matter to follow the freshly blazed line. We shouted and called out to Casey and Sully — but the wind carried away the sound. We fired the pistol at intervals and stopped to listen for a response, but all we heard was the wind, the falling rain and the crashing of branches. A mile further along the control line we heard a faint answer to our calls. Stumbling over rocks and windfalls we ran ahead; the calls were easy to hear now; it was Casey calling, "Over here, over here."

We found the two of them huddled under a spreading Hemlock tree, soaked to the skin and shivering. When we

threw the light on them, they looked like two frightened animals. Burr put his parka around Casey and Jack gave his gear to Sully. They were unable to stop shaking, but we got them on their feet and headed back to camp.

In camp, we stripped and dried them with rough towels. When their circulation returned to normal, they dressed in dry clothes and Ben announced that he had hot coffee and stew ready. As they sipped their hot coffee, Casey explained that they had been caught in the sudden darkness and could no longer see the blazes on the line; it was mutually agreed that they would sit tight — rather than leave the control line. It was a wise decision. Had they wandered off the control line, we might never have found them, and there was little possibility that they could have found their way out of the wilderness.

The rain continued for the next day, confining us to camp where we caught up on our paper work and repaired the canoes.

Many birds discovered our camp, making daily appearances for handouts. The Canada Jays were the boldest, following Ben into the cook tent. This bird, sometimes called the "Whiskey Jack" or "Camp Robber" would pick up and fly off with anything that attracted them. One of our Jays flew off with a lighted cigarette butt and perched in an aspen tree and, as he blinked his eyes from the smoke, tried to figure out what he could do with this prize.

The Black-capped Chickadees made our camp their home. Ben suspended a piece of suet on a string just outside our tent and these tiny creatures grasped the suet with their claws, sometimes in an upside down position, as they pecked away, constantly keeping up a steady chatter of "chick-a-dee-dee-dee".

Ben suffered with an impacted tooth until I decided to send him into town for treatment. This created a sticky prob-

lem: Who would take on the duties of camp cook? I called the boys together and asked for a volunteer.

Silence.

I pleaded, explaining it would only be for a few days.

More silence.

Finally, we decided to draw straws. When Jack drew the short straw he exclaimed, "Aw hell fellas, I don't know a damn thing about cookin'."

"You'll have to try," I informed him. "However — the first man that complains will immediately have to take over as cook."

Jack tried. But his ignorance about cooking was appalling, and the concoctions he put on the table were not fit for human consumption. Jugger, as usual, was the first to start eating. "Holy cow! I can't eat this slop." He pushed back from the table in disgust.

"Sorry Jugger," I said, 'but you have just earned yourself the job of cook.'

"Damn! Guess I'll have to cook or starve to death."

Jugger did somewhat better; he made it exceedingly clear, however, that he thoroughly despised the assignment. After the second day, he slyly planned to make someone complain in order to get rid of this onerous task. When he made biscuits the next morning, he stealthily loaded them with salt.

Burr was the first to take a bite of biscuit. He turned from the table, spit out the mouthful and shouted, "Damn it, these biscuits are salty!" Then with a quick look in my direction he hastened to add, "... but that's th' way I like 'em."

There was an outburst of laughter and Jugger continued to serve as cook until Ben returned.

Days passed, the temperature dropped, and the nights became so cold that we no longer gathered around the campfire. The wind was swinging to the North and most of the ducks left our lake. As winter approached, the packers brought

word from the Super that we were to remain at the side camp as long as possible, but not long enough to become stranded when the lake froze over. I estimated we could complete our survey work in about two weeks.

At dusk on a raw windy day, two officers of the Border Patrol paddled up to our dock and joined us for the roast partridge supper Ben had prepared. They did not reveal the purpose of their trip to this out-of-the-way place, but asked

the canoe and heard the sound of ripping canvas. We were close to shore and immediately landed and leaped out of the damaged canoe which was rapidly filling with river water. The Border Patrol officers landed behind us and helped pull our canoe on shore where we surveyed the damage. We found a three inch tear in the canvas and realized we had no repair equipment. One of the patrol officers, an old timer, told us to relax as repairs could be made Indian style.

I was apprehensive. It looked like a long delay and possible abandonment of our canoe, but we followed the officer's instructions in the hope that we could repair the damage and get back to our camp before dark.

We built a small fire while the officer obtained some spruce gum and birch bark. By the time our fire was blazing, he had dug into his pack sack and came up with a small piece of canvas which he placed alongside the canoe with the spruce gum, birch bark and a short piece of wire. He then placed a wad of spruce gum on the wire and held it over the fire until it softened; then he curled the birch bark into a funnel and set the narrow end on fire. This acted as a small blow torch which he used to dry and heat the bottom of the canoe around the tear. Skillfully he applied the soft gum and, with his birch blowtorch, softened and spread the gum around the rip. Carefully, he applied the canvas patch, covered it with spruce gum and let it harden. In less than an hour we were on our way, reaching the border waters without further problems. We bid farewell to the officers and made an uneventful trip back to camp in a dry canoe.

The temperature dropped steadily and thin ice extended further into the lake each morning. The crew was growing impatient. Our survey work was completed; the time had come to break camp.



me to accompany them through the portage route to Crooked Lake on the Canadian border. Jack and I were familiar with this route and agreed to accompany them in the morning.

In the early morning the four of us paddled down the Stuart River in two canoes. We bucked a headwind across Stuart Lake and stopped at the outlet to Dahlgren River for a cigarette. It was a brief pause as the wind was cold and the darkening sky warned of a change in the weather. We soon came to the rapids, where Jack and I in the lead canoe picked our way carefully among the rocks. Suddenly we felt a blow to

At daybreak all hands turned out to take down the tents, load all equipment in the canoes and clean up the campsite. By mid-morning we were all packed and ready to leave, and not a bit too soon as the wind was directly out of the North bringing a rapid drop in temperature.

As we turned the point to leave the lake, Burr swung the lead canoe around and rested his paddle. We brought the other three canoes alongside as Burr sat silently looking across the lake to our abandoned campsite. I was startled when he said in a low voice, "Let's take a minute to thank God for the opportunity He has given us to spend a brief time in this beautiful place."

Only the waves slapping against the sides of the canoes broke the silence.

"Guess we owe some thanks to the CCC too," he continued. "If it wasn't for the corps we would all be back in the city — with no job."

Then Ben spoke up. "I'd say we have all been lucky to have been here. For me, it's been a great experience."

There were murmurs of agreement as Burr and Tony turned their canoe and headed up river. Jack and I brought up in the rear with a last pensive look back at White Feather Lake, which none of us would ever see again.

Eliot Zimmerman